

Some Rise as Others Fall

Illegitimacy in Indian Dance

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Illicit Worlds of Indian Dance: Cultures of Exclusion

Anna Morcom

Oxford University Press, 2013. 286 pages.

No reason not to be frank: I love this book. Like the process of making ghee, which involves boiling butter until it “clarifies,” the richness of this book can be boiled down to a clear, even simple, argument that is nevertheless powerful enough to reframe the historical study of Indian dance from the colonial period to the present day. The argument is this: The anointing of certain performing arts, and those who would perform them, as “legitimate” conveyors of Indian culture simultaneously cast out others. A zone of exclusion was thereby created into which all-too-precipitously fell any arts and artists *not* invited to the classicizing, sanitizing, and entextualizing party. This highly generative heuristic model gives readers the opportunity to contemplate the possibility of a flip side to the well-documented historical processes of reform that created, and indeed continue to create, cultural products charged with symbolizing the Indian nation. In the author’s own words, “The model presents the official and the illicit dimensions of India’s performing arts as two sides of the same coin.”

Illicit Worlds of Indian Dance will be of interest to scholars in transgender studies because it necessarily engages the ways gender itself is constituted and takes on meaning. Indeed, contestation over the status of performers seems woven right into the fabric of Indian dance as a conveyor of Indian culture; arguably, transgender (*kothi*) dancers, dancers who are also sex workers, and other performers marginalized through gender nonconformity are deeply imbricated in the very notion of a legitimate and appropriate India. Implicitly, this

text invites us to engage questions such as, What kind of women may appropriately perform India? And who, then, may appropriately perform “woman” and “dancer”? The market for Indian dance suggests some surprising answers.

The book’s author, Anna Morcom, is an ethnomusicologist at the University of London. She has written previously about Hindi film songs and about music and politics in contemporary Tibet. She is an empathic interlocutor and clearly had a good rapport with the contemporary communities of hereditary female performers, female-embodied *kothi* performers, and the members of sex workers’ unions with whom she worked. She navigates with clarity and grace the increasingly complex terrain of global “rescue” narratives that prod performing artists—who are increasingly experiencing the economic and social distress of diminishing opportunities to earn a living qua traditional performers—to instead take up the well-oiled “development” discourses of identity-based initiatives that treat sex work as a “problem” and an “issue,” thus buying into victimhood as a means of saving face.

A first intimation of Morcom’s stakes in the subject matter of this book comes near the end of the introduction. What I quote here is actually one of very few passages in which the author speaks of herself in relation to her work or reflexively of her fieldwork experience. As an anthropologist interested in the intersubjectivity born of fieldwork relations, I felt a surge of relief at reaching this passage. It not only gave me a sense of the authorial motivations that undergird Morcom’s research but also introduced, in a conversational tone, the central nodes of affect that organize the book:

My own discovery of the illicit worlds of performing arts happened by accident in 2006. Researching a project on Bollywood dance, I followed up leads to bar girls in Mumbai. I then found myself in the loop of an underworld of Indian dance. From the dance bars I was led to communities of struggling contemporary courtesans, of court dancers turned sex workers, of males dancing *mujra* in female dress and seducing their male audience. . . . I had been studying Indian performing arts, language and culture for thirteen years at that time, and was shocked that I had no knowledge of this extensive dimension of Indian culture. None of this world is visible in general accounts of “Indian culture.” Over the course of my fieldwork, I witnessed remarkable talent and saw some deeply inspired dancing by female *mujra* and *kothi* [female impersonator] performers. I also saw real desperation, exclusion, and a collapse in socio-cultural status, with lives and livelihoods made impossible or next to impossible. While there was energy, enthusiasm, talent and skill, there was only, at best, decreasing contexts within which to use them. Increasing stigma and hopelessness abounded. Writing this book thus has a strong

ethical imperative. It aims to tell untold histories, to reveal unseen cultures, and to present a more accurate picture of the terrain of Indian performing arts. (27)

In the service of these aims, Morcom gives us chapters that detail the historical development of discourses of exclusion of traditional performers. Such dancers were first excluded from the “respectable” performing arts since they were deemed unworthy of representing the new nation in the early twentieth century. This discourse was then reprised in the early twenty-first century in surprisingly parallel terms when the expanding middle class of a globalizing “new India” saw fit to treat traditional performers more as tricks than as artists.

The book moves through the history of discursive developments that have led to the dire situation in which practitioners of what Morcom labels the “illicit” performing arts find themselves today. From a well-documented chapter on the dynamics of exclusion in colonial and postcolonial India, to a discussion of the history of female hereditary performers in post-Independence India, Morcom moves on to introduce *kothi* female enactment or embodiment as “a widespread and traditionally culturally acceptable practice in South Asia” that is yet another articulation of the illicit world of Indian dance.

Morcom’s consideration of the complexity of the illicit worlds provides ample room for analysis of gender as embodied and performed. In some places, Morcom draws direct comparisons among the *kothis* and assigned-female dancers:

Unlike some female performers, I never saw *kothis* dancing half-heartedly. The female performers’ lack of enthusiasm relates in part to their lack of status and opportunity as dancers, and a sense of depression and hopelessness in these communities as a whole. However, in many ways, the *kothis* too are becoming increasingly involved in sex work and are, in many cases, unable to survive from dance alone. This, however, has not translated into any kind of lack of enthusiasm or sense of pointlessness about dance. Here, although they are in so many ways equivalent to each other in terms of their social role as (erotic) female performers, it is possible to see how the meaning, value, and purpose of dance for *kothis* has one key difference from hereditary female dancers. For *kothis*, who are male in body, it is through doing rather than being that they are female—and so dance has a particularly profound importance. (100)

No dancer generates meaning outside of the social and economic context in which she exists. There is, however, a particular pressure on dancers to perform embodiment since it is only through their bodies in performance that they register socially as performers at all.

The first three chapters effectively lay the groundwork for the final three chapters, which together take us roughly from the 1980s to the present day. The author's nuanced presentation of the material in the final chapters impressively documents the changing terrain of discursive attitudes toward the less "acceptable" performing arts since the liberalization of India's media and markets beginning in 1991. Specifically, Morcom explores the expansion of the legitimacy of "sexy dance moves" from cinema into the respectable middle classes via the Bollywood dance craze; controversies over the livelihood of Mumbai's bar girls that paradoxically made strange bedfellows of the respectable middle-class and young hereditary female performers who had been given a new lease on life through this new form of patronage in the big city; and, finally, the current conflicted state of *kothi* erotic performers/female enactors as they contend with tensions between the potential protections offered by an embrace of the discourses of gay advocacy and what had been their more traditional strategic invisibility to mainstream society.

Morcom recognizes the many ways legitimate cultural forms are all too often built on the backs of other artistic forms (and their performers) that are relegated, in the very process of legitimization, to a marginalized status. This insight can be quite generative for future studies. Morcom's book certainly helps me understand why the genre of south Indian theater that I study remains so stigmatized. Tamil *Special Drama* (Special Naadakam) artists are simply not good candidates for those processes of embourgeoisement that would be required to turn either them or their art form into any less messy a formation. Special Drama artists come from all castes and religious communities (Hindu, Muslim, Christian), and many marry (if at all) across caste, class, regional, and religious lines. In addition, both historically and today in both comedic and dramatic roles, many Special Drama artists play cross-dressed roles. These run in the familiar direction of male-to-female but also take the less common guise of female-to-male cross-dressing. Extending Morcom's rubric of licit/illicit and inclusion/exclusion to the marginalized status of a highly variegated community such as that of Special Drama artists not only helps me complicate my own understanding of the ways discourses of inclusion and exclusion might function but also pushes Morcom's model in provocative ways. The Special Drama community includes hereditary artists as well as those who are not, and transgender artists as well as those who are not. So in addition to that external gaze that fixes such performing communities as apart from the mainstream of respectability, are there hierarchies of marginalization and exclusion within any one community? To what extent do performing artists internalize mainstream discourses? Do such processes affect the communities Morcom studies? And if so, what are the contours of their hierarchies? Applying the lens Morcom provides us to syncretic genres such as Special

Drama thus suggests the productivity of her model, and perhaps simultaneously complicates it in valuable ways.

Anna Morcom's *Illicit Worlds of Indian Dance* will richly reward readers willing to put in the effort necessary to read this book. Her work encourages us to join her in caring about how stigmatized communities of performers, whether hereditary or *kothi* or otherwise, are currently faring in "the new India" of an increasingly globalized and culturally dominant middle class. This is not, however, a book for everyone. It is both detailed and dense and would doubtless prove rather tough going for anyone not already familiar with, at least to some extent, the history of Indian dance since the late nineteenth century. At times, sociological details are presented without any conceptual pegboard on which to hang them; this is the case with the list of castes of hereditary performers in chapter 2, for example, which extends over more than twenty pages. Even more seriously, basic definitions of genres of North Indian performing arts come far too late in the book to assuage readers' confusion: it is not until page 173, in chapter 6, for example, that a subsection titled "Contexts and Genres" finally defines for the reader basic key performance genres—including *Ramlila*, *Nautanki*, *Lavani*, and *Jagran*—that first appear much earlier in the text. Similarly, for non-Hindi-speaking readers, there will be opacities peppered throughout the text. I have one pragmatic suggestion that might go far toward remedying the majority of the above criticisms: this book needs a glossary. Perhaps one could be made available as an online supplement? It would certainly behoove the author and the press to figure out how best to make such a resource available to future readers, in the full hope that Morcom's insights will indeed be taken up in future studies of Indian dance worlds.

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